

Strengthening Institutional Image in the Public Sector: The Role of Service Quality, e-WOM, and Public Trust

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Abstract—This study aims to examine the influence of public service quality and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on institutional image, with public trust as a moderating variable, at the Office of State Assets and Auction Services (KPKNL) Pekanbaru. Data were collected from 183 stakeholders and analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that public service quality ($\beta = 0.474$; $p < 0.001$) and e-WOM ($\beta = 0.233$; $p < 0.001$) have a positive and significant effect on institutional image. The model explains 81.1% of the variance in institutional image ($R^2 = 0.811$), indicating strong predictive power. Furthermore, public trust significantly moderates the relationship between public service quality and institutional image ($\beta = 0.201$; $p = 0.006$), but does not moderate the relationship between e-WOM and institutional image ($\beta = 0.072$; $p = 0.372$). These findings highlight the differentiated role of trust in strengthening service-based reputation formation in the public sector.

Keywords: Public Service Quality; e-WOM; Institutional Image; Public Trust

1. INTRODUCTION

Low quality of public services has a direct impact on the image of government institutions and can weaken public trust in government performance. A negative institutional image not only reduces citizens' confidence but also affects satisfaction and loyalty toward public services. Therefore, government institutions are required to continuously improve service quality and manage their institutional image through effective communication and transparent service delivery. From a marketing and public management perspective, maintaining a strong institutional image is essential for long-term sustainability and organizational legitimacy (Erben Yavuz et al., 2024; Sulemana et al., 2025).

In the public sector, service quality remains a major determinant of institutional credibility and citizen satisfaction. Public service organizations are expected to provide reliable, responsive, and transparent services that meet stakeholder expectations. However, public service delivery in many government institutions still faces significant challenges, including bureaucratic complexity, limited transparency, and public dissatisfaction with service performance. These issues may weaken institutional image and reduce public trust in government institutions. Within the Indonesian context, public sector organizations such as the State Assets and Auction Service Office (KPKNL) Pekanbaru are required to ensure high-quality public services in asset management, valuation, and auction services in order to maintain institutional credibility and public confidence.

In an increasingly digital and transparent era, institutional image has become a critical factor in shaping public trust and stakeholder perceptions. A positive institutional image contributes to higher levels of satisfaction, loyalty, and trust in public organizations, while a negative image may undermine institutional legitimacy (Cardoso & Cardoso, 2024; Schilke & Reimann, 2025). Institutional image is influenced by multiple factors, particularly public service quality and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). Public service quality, which encompasses reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangible aspects of service delivery, has been widely recognized as a key determinant of institutional reputation and public satisfaction (Fauzana & Utama, 2025; Halim et al., 2025). High-quality service delivery signals professionalism and accountability, thereby strengthening institutional image in the public sector.

In addition to service quality, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has emerged as an influential factor in shaping institutional image. Digital platforms enable stakeholders to share experiences and evaluations of public services, which in turn influence public perceptions of institutional performance and credibility. Positive e-WOM has been found to enhance organizational reputation and public trust, whereas negative digital narratives may weaken institutional image (Dwivedi et al., 2021a; Feng et al., 2025). Recent studies also indicate that e-WOM plays a strategic role in strengthening brand image and public trust in digital environments, including government service contexts (Sudaryanto et al., 2025).

Public trust represents another critical factor in shaping institutional image. Trust reflects stakeholders' confidence in an institution's competence, integrity, and benevolence (Dzimińska et al., 2018; Juhaidi, Al-Ansi, et al., 2025). In public sector organizations, trust functions as a key element in building institutional legitimacy and strengthening relationships between citizens and government institutions (Didenko et al., 2020). When public trust is high, stakeholders are more likely to interpret service quality positively and develop favorable perceptions of institutional performance. Conversely, low levels of trust may weaken the positive effects of service quality and digital communication on institutional image.

Previous studies have examined the relationships between service quality, e-WOM, public trust, and institutional image. Service quality has been shown to significantly influence institutional image and public satisfaction (Chien & Chi, 2019; Yum & Yoo, 2023), while e-WOM has been identified as a powerful communication mechanism that shapes

organizational reputation and stakeholder perceptions (X. Liu et al., 2024; Ngo, Bui, et al., 2024). Furthermore, public trust has been found to strengthen institutional legitimacy and service effectiveness in public organizations (Lock & Jacobs, 2025; Pratolo et al., 2022). However, most prior studies have focused on direct relationships among these variables, and limited research has examined the combined influence of public service quality and e-WOM on institutional image within government institutions.

Moreover, empirical studies exploring the moderating role of public trust in the relationship between service quality, digital communication, and institutional image remain limited and inconclusive. While some studies suggest that trust strengthens the impact of service quality on institutional outcomes, its role in moderating the influence of e-WOM on institutional image is still underexplored, particularly in the public sector context. This gap highlights the need for further investigation into how public trust functions as a moderating mechanism in shaping institutional image through both service performance and digital communication.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the influence of public service quality and electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) on institutional image at KPKNL Pekanbaru. In addition, this study analyzes the moderating role of public trust in strengthening the relationship between public service quality and institutional image as well as between e-WOM and institutional image. This study contributes to the public sector service management literature by providing empirical evidence on the integrated role of service quality, digital communication, and public trust in shaping institutional image within government institutions. Practically, the findings offer insights for strengthening institutional reputation and public trust through improved service quality and strategic digital communication.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Design and Location

This study employs a quantitative research approach to examine the relationships among public service quality, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), public trust, and institutional image. The research was conducted at the State Assets and Auction Service Office (KPKNL) Pekanbaru, Indonesia, which is a vertical unit under the Directorate General of State Assets Management, Ministry of Finance. The selection of this institution is based on its strategic role in providing public services related to state asset management, valuation, and auction services.

2.2 Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of stakeholders who have interacted with public services provided by KPKNL Pekanbaru, including central and local government agencies, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and regional government-owned enterprises (ROEs). The total population comprised 338 stakeholder units. The sample size was determined using the Slovin formula with a 5% margin of error, resulting in 183 respondents. A purposive sampling technique was applied to ensure that respondents had direct experience with the services provided by KPKNL Pekanbaru. Only stakeholders who had utilized KPKNL services within the last two years were included in the sample.

2.3 Respondent Characteristics

The respondents consisted of stakeholders representing government institutions, SOEs, and regional enterprises who had direct interaction with KPKNL Pekanbaru's services. A total of 183 valid responses were obtained and used for analysis. Respondents were selected based on their experience in accessing services related to asset management, valuation, state receivables, and auction services.

2.4 Measurement of Variables

All variables in this study were measured using a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Public service quality was measured using indicators adapted from the SERVQUAL model, including reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and service security (Aditya et al., 2023; Gazi et al., 2024).

Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) was measured through indicators such as credibility, intensity, and positivity of digital communication (H. Liu et al., 2024; Mendoza-Moreira et al., 2025). Institutional image was assessed through perceptions of institutional reputation, credibility, and stakeholder satisfaction (Purevsuren et al., 2025). Public trust was measured based on the dimensions of ability, integrity, and benevolence (Purevsuren et al., 2025).

Prior to data collection, the instrument was tested for validity and reliability to ensure measurement accuracy and consistency.

2.5 Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for predictive analysis and its ability to handle complex models with multiple constructs and indicators (Guenther et al., 2023).

The analysis was carried out in two stages: evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and evaluation of the structural model (inner model). The outer model assessment included tests of convergent validity, discriminant

validity, and construct reliability. The inner model evaluation examined path coefficients, coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and moderating effects to test the proposed hypotheses.

2.6 Research Framework

This study proposes a conceptual framework in which public service quality and e-WOM act as independent variables influencing institutional image as the dependent variable. Public trust is positioned as a moderating variable that may strengthen or weaken the relationships between public service quality, e-WOM, and institutional image. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1

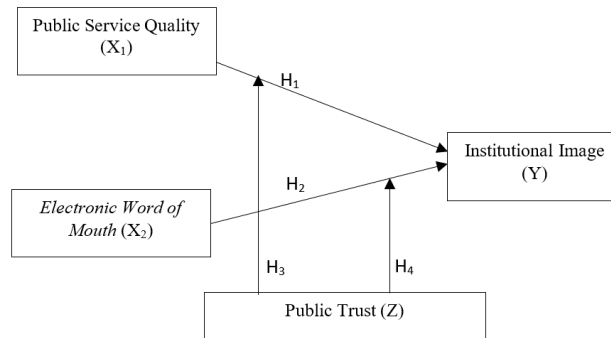


Figure 1. Framework Research Model

2.7 Definition of Operational Variabel

2.7.1 Public Service Quality

Public service quality is the ability of a government institution to provide high-quality services to the public (Rifai & Adilansyah, 2024). According to (Gonu et al., 2023) good service quality can increase customer satisfaction and build a positive image of an institution or company. (Gonu et al., 2023), state that public service quality can be viewed from five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. High-quality performance in these five dimensions can increase customer satisfaction and build a positive image of the institution in the eyes of the public. Indicators used in this study include a. reliability, b. security/safety, c. responsiveness, d. assurance dan e. empathy.

2.7.2 Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WoM)

e-WOM is a form of electronic communication in which consumers exchange information about products or services through digital platforms (Beyari & Garamoun, 2024). e-WOM can be measured through several dimensions, namely credibility, influence strength, reach, and positivity. e-WOM may play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of an institution. Indicators used in this study include a. credibility, b. influence strength, c. reach, d. positivity.

2.7.3 Institutional Image

The image of KPKNL Pekanbaru refers to the public’s perception of its reputation and performance. Institutional image can be observed through various aspects, such as public trust, loyalty, and satisfaction with the services provided by the institution. Corporate image is a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a customer holds about a company (Tahir et al., 2024). Corporate image is a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a customer holds about a company.

2.7.4 Public Trust

Public trust is the willingness or belief of individuals to engage in long-term relationships aimed at creating positive cooperation. According to (Iddrisu, 2025), public or consumer trust can be understood through an integrative model of organizational trust. This model views trust as a multidimensional construct consisting of three main components:

- a. Ability: This component concerns an individual’s belief that the organization or trusted party has the necessary expertise, competence, resources, and quality to perform its tasks or obligations effectively. Trust in ability is based on the belief that the organization can deliver expected results and achieve its objectives..
- b. Integrity: This component concerns an individual’s belief that the organization or trusted party upholds strong ethical values, has a commitment to honesty, and behaves consistently with accepted moral and normative standards. Trust in integrity is based on the belief that the organization will act fairly, honestly, and responsibly.
- c. Benevolence: This component concerns an individual’s belief that the organization or trusted party has good intentions, a desire to provide benefits, and concerns itself with the interests of the individuals or groups that place their trust in it. Trust in benevolence is based on the belief that the organization will consider and pay attention to the interests of others

Indicators in this study include trust in officers and their services and trust in the service facilities provided

3. RESULTS AND EVALUATION

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Respondents Characteristic

A total of 183 valid responses were obtained from stakeholders who had interacted with KPKNL Pekanbaru’s public services. The sample comprised 130 male respondents (71.0%) and 53 female respondents (29.0%). This demographic profile reflects the gender composition of the surveyed stakeholders (see Table 1)

Table 1. Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency
Male	130
Female	53
Total	183

In terms of stakeholder affiliation, the majority of respondents originated from Central Government Ministries/Agencies (322 service interactions recorded), followed by Local Government agencies (7 interactions) and State-Owned Enterprises/Regional SOEs (9 interactions). This distribution indicates that KPKNL Pekanbaru primarily serves central government units as the main stakeholder group in asset management, valuation, state receivables, and auction services. The Illustrated can see Tabel 2 below :

Table 2. Stakeholder Category

Stakeholder Category	Frequency
Central Government Ministries/Agencies (K/L Pusat)	322
Local Government (Pemerintah Daerah)	7
State-Owned Enterprises/Regional SOEs (BUMN/BUMD)	9
Total	338

3.1.2. Outer Model

The outer model describes the relationship between indicators and the latent variables they measure. The evaluation of the outer model aims to ensure that the research instruments used exhibit adequate levels of validity and reliability so that they are suitable for use as measurement tools. For constructs with formative indicators, it is assumed that the indicators are not correlated with one another; therefore, the examination is conducted with particular attention to potential multicollinearity. The design of the outer model in this study is illustrated in the following Figure 2:

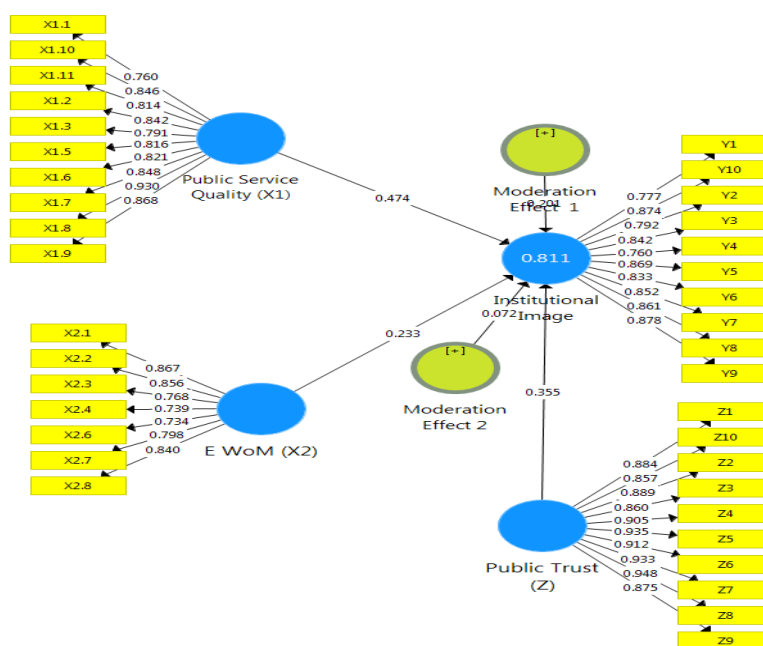


Figure 2. Outer and Inner Model

The measurement model demonstrates satisfactory convergent validity, as all outer loading values exceed the recommended threshold of 0.60. This finding confirms that the indicators reliably represent their respective latent constructs. Accordingly, the measurement model meets the required validity criteria and is appropriate for subsequent structural model assessment.

3.1.3 Composite Reliability

Construct reliability is evaluated using two main measures: Cronbach’s Alpha and Composite Reliability. A construct is considered reliable if its Cronbach’s Alpha value exceeds 0.60 and its Composite Reliability value is greater than 0.70. When these criteria are met, the indicators forming the construct are deemed to possess sufficient internal consistency in representing the latent variable being measured. (see Table 3)

Table 3. Composite Reliability Test Results

Variabel	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Description
Public Service Quality (X ₁)	0,951	0,958	Reliabel
Electronic Word of Mouth (X ₂)	0,907	0,926	Reliabel
Institutional Image (Y)	0,951	0,958	Reliabel
Public Trust (Z)	0,974	0,977	Reliabel

The reliability assessment indicates that all constructs achieve Composite Reliability values above 0.90 and Cronbach’s Alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. This demonstrates strong internal consistency among the measurement items and confirms that the instrument is sufficiently reliable for subsequent structural model evaluation.

3.1.4. Inner Model

The goodness-of-fit test of the structural model (fit test of the structural model) is the stage used to evaluate the inner model, which describes the relationships among latent variables according to the research hypotheses. Evaluation of the inner model is carried out by examining the significance of the path coefficients to determine whether the hypothesized relationships between variables are statistically significant. The structural model in this study is visualized in the following Figure 3 :

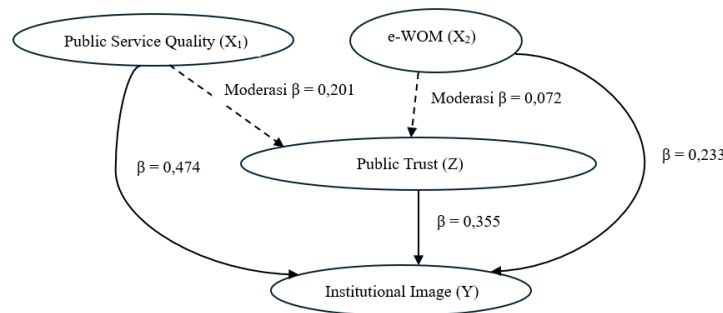


Figure 3. Inner Model

The inner model was obtained through the bootstrapping procedure in PLS-SEM analysis. Bootstrapping is employed because it can handle problems related to non-normal data distribution and produce more stable estimates. Using this method, each relationship between variables is tested repeatedly using resampled datasets, resulting in significance values for each path that represent the testing of the research hypotheses.

a. *R Square*

The R-Square (R²) test is used to measure how much variation in the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variables in the research model. The R-square results from the SmartPLS output are presented in the following table 4 below.

Table 4. R-Square Values

Variabel	R Square	Adjusted R Square
Institutional Image (Y)	0,811	0,806

The coefficient of determination (R²) for institutional image is 0.811, indicating a substantial level of explanatory power. This suggests that public service quality, e-WOM, and public trust jointly account for a large proportion of variance in institutional image. The high R² value demonstrates that the structural model possesses strong predictive relevance and robustness in explaining institutional image in the public sector setting.

b. *Predictive Relevance (Q Square)*

The Predictive Relevance (Q²) test is used to assess the predictive capability of the structural model in relation to the dependent variable. The Q² calculation is as follows :

$$Q^2 = 1 - (1 - R^2)$$

$$Q^2 = 1 - (1 - 0,811)$$

$$Q^2 = 1 - (0,189)$$

$$Q^2 = 0,811$$

The Q² value of 0.811 is well above the threshold of 0.35. Thus, this research model has very strong predictive relevance. This proves that the independent variables (Public Service Quality and e-WOM), supported by Public Trust, are able to explain the variation in Institutional Image substantially..

c. *Good of Fit (GoF)*

The Goodness of Fit (GoF) index is a measure used to evaluate how well the research model as a whole can explain the observed data. In the context of PLS-SEM, this index serves as a global measure that combines the strength of the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model).

The GoF formula is as follows :

$$GoF = \sqrt{\overline{AVE} \times \overline{R^2}}$$

where:

$$\overline{AVE} = \text{average AVE of all constructs}$$

$$\overline{R^2} = \text{average } R^2 \text{ of endogenous variables in the model}$$

$$\overline{AVE} = (0,697 + 0,643 + 0,811 + 0,697)/4 = 0,712$$

$$\overline{R^2} = 0,811$$

$$GoF = \sqrt{0,712 \times 0,811}$$

$$GoF = \sqrt{0,577} = 0,760$$

The GoF value of 0.760 is far above the threshold of 0.36, indicating that the research model has a high degree of fit. Therefore, overall, the model can be stated to explain the data very well, both in terms of construct validity and the explanatory power of the structural model.

d. *Path Coefficient*

The direct effect test aims to see the extent to which independent variables (Public Service Quality and e-WOM) directly influence the dependent variable (Institutional Image). The path coefficient value shows the direction and strength of the relationship, while t-statistics and p-values are used to determine the significance of the effect. The bootstrapping results show that all direct effects are significant, as the t-statistics values exceed 1.96 and the p-values are less than 0.05.

Table 5. Direct Effect Test Results

Relationship	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics	T-tabel	P-Values	Description
Public Service Quality (X ₁) → Institutional Image (Y)	0,474	7,321	1,973	0,000	Positive / Significant
e-WOM (X ₂) → Institutional Image (Y)	0,233	6,512	1,973	0,000	Positive / Significant

The structural model indicates that public service quality exerts a positive and significant influence on institutional image ($\beta = 0.474$; $t = 7.321$; $p < 0.001$), highlighting the importance of reliable and responsive public services in strengthening institutional reputation. In addition, e-WOM demonstrates a positive and significant effect on institutional image ($\beta = 0.233$; $t = 6.512$; $p < 0.001$), confirming that stakeholders' digital interactions and shared service experiences significantly contribute to the formation of institutional image in the public sector..

e. *Moderating*

The moderation test is conducted to determine whether Public Trust (Z) can strengthen or weaken the influence of Public Service Quality (X₁) and e-WOM (X₂) on Institutional Image.

Table 6. Moderation Effect Test Results

Moderation Relationship	Original Sample (O)	T-Statistics	t tabel	P-Values	Description
Moderation of Z on the relationship X ₁ → Y	0,201	2,745	1,973	0,006	Positive / Significant
Moderation of Z on the relationship X ₂ → Y	0,072	0,892	1,973	0,372	Not Significant

The moderating effect analysis demonstrates that public trust significantly strengthens the relationship between public service quality and institutional image ($\beta = 0.201$; $p < 0.05$), suggesting that trust acts as an amplifying factor in transforming service performance into positive institutional perceptions.

Conversely, the moderating role of public trust in the relationship between e-WOM and institutional image is not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.072$; $p > 0.05$). This result indicates that the influence of digital communication on institutional image is not contingent upon the level of public trust.

3.2. Discussions

3.2.1. Effect of Public Service Quality on Institutional Image

The results show that public service quality has a positive and significant effect on institutional image, with a t-statistic of $7.321 > t\text{-table } 1.973$ and a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$. This indicates that the better the quality of services provided by KPKNL Pekanbaru, the more positive the image formed in the eyes of the public. In other words, citizens' experiences related to reliability, accuracy, and courtesy in service delivery become key factors in shaping their perception of the institution's credibility and professionalism. These findings reinforce those of (NGO et al., 2025) which concluded that improvements in service quality have a direct impact on the formation of institutional image in higher education institutions. Service dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, and assurance have been shown to contribute to the creation of perceptions of a credible, user-oriented institution. Similarly, (Mugova et al., 2025) found that superior service quality leads to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty, which indirectly strengthen organizational image.

Theoretically, these results are consistent with the SERVQUAL framework developed by (Yandi & Diah, 2024), which emphasizes five main dimensions for assessing service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. When this model is adapted to the public sector, each dimension reflects the competence of public officials, the accuracy of procedures, and the attention paid to citizen needs. Thus, improving service quality is not merely about administrative efficiency but also about representing the institution's values of integrity and dedication to the public.

In the context of public sector organizations such as KPKNL Pekanbaru, the implementation of service principles emphasizing certainty, responsiveness, and empathy reflects institutional commitment to professionalism and transparency. Consistent service standards, accountable procedures, and transparent communication mechanisms function as critical signals that shape stakeholders' perceptions of institutional credibility. These findings suggest that service quality operates not only as an operational requirement but also as a strategic reputational mechanism that strengthens public trust and sustains positive institutional image in the long term.

3.2.2. Effect of e-WOM on Institutional Image

The results show that the e-WOM *e-WOM* (X_2) variable has a positive and significant effect on Institutional Image (Y), with a t-statistic of $6.512 > t\text{-table } 1.973$ and a p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$. This indicates that public opinions and reviews disseminated through digital media whether in the form of comments, discussions, or posts have a real influence on public perception of KPKNL Pekanbaru.

This finding reinforces the results of (Ngo, Vuong, et al., 2024) who demonstrated that e-WOM plays an important role in improving corporate image and influencing consumers' purchase intentions. The same mechanism can be applied in the public sector, where positive messages or reviews from the public about service quality and transparency at KPKNL Pekanbaru serve as signals of credibility that strengthen perceptions of the institution's professionalism and accountability.

The results are (Juhaidi, Lathifaturrahmah, et al., 2025) which found that e-WOM significantly influences college image in a higher education context. In public organizations, (Gartner et al., 2021) emphasize that social media, service quality, and public relations synergistically shape organizational image. Accordingly, this study confirms that public conversations in digital spaces are not simply reflections of service performance, but actively function as shapers of institutional image. For KPKNL Pekanbaru, this implies that active, responsive, and experience-based digital communication strategies are strategically important in strengthening institutional image in the era of information openness.

This finding is consistent with integrated marketing communication theory (Huang et al., 2026), which emphasizes the credibility of word of mouth as an experience-based communication mechanism. In public sector settings, peer-generated communication often carries greater persuasive power than formal institutional messaging, as stakeholders perceive it as more authentic and trustworthy. Consequently, positive digital narratives related to service quality, professionalism, and transparency serve as critical signals that shape institutional image. Thus, e-WOM performs a dual function, acting both as a reputational communication channel and as a reinforcing mechanism for public trust in government institutions.

This result is also consistent with recent findings by (Nguyen et al., 2025) which highlight that e-WOM is effective in enhancing brand image and public trust in digital environments, including in government electronic services (e-government). The quality of messages, credibility of information sources, and institutional responses to digital conversations have been shown to determine the strength of e-WOM in shaping organizational image. Therefore, in the context of KPKNL Pekanbaru, digital communication management cannot be passive; a proactive strategy is needed to ensure that citizens' positive experiences are documented and disseminated through official channels and online communities. Thus, strengthening institutional image in the digital era depends not only on service quality but also on how positive narratives are managed and spread through credible and sustainable e-WOM.

Overall, these findings indicate that e-WOM is a strategic element in shaping the image of public institutions in the era of digital communication. With positive and significant coefficients, it can be concluded that the higher the intensity of positive digital conversations, the stronger the public's perception of KPKNL Pekanbaru's professionalism, transparency, and accountability. This reinforces the argument that the image of government institutions is shaped not only by internal service performance but also by how the institution appears, interacts, and is narrated in the digital public sphere. Consequently, strengthening digital communication management, enhancing staff capacity to manage social

media, and fostering active collaboration with the public and stakeholders are crucial steps in building sustainable digital trust. Through this approach, KPKNL Pekanbaru can not only maintain its positive image but also foster broader public engagement in supporting its mission of transparent and accountable state asset management.

3.2.3. Moderating Role of Public Trust in the Relationship Between Public Service Quality and Institutional Image

The results reveal that public trust significantly moderates the relationship between public service quality and institutional image, with a path coefficient of 0.201, a t-statistic of $2.745 > 1.973$, and a p-value of $0.006 < 0.05$. This means that public trust is able to strengthen the positive effect of service quality on institutional image. Thus, improvements in service quality have a greater impact on public perceptions when accompanied by a high level of public trust in the service-providing institution. In the context of KPKNL Pekanbaru, this suggests that the reliability of services and public trust work synergistically in forming a positive and credible institutional image.

These findings are consistent with (Choi et al., 2025) who found that public trust functions as a moderating variable that strengthens the relationship between service quality and the image of local government institutions. Their study emphasizes that citizens with a high level of trust are more inclined to evaluate an institution positively when receiving high-quality services. From a theoretical perspective, these results align with the Three Components of Trust model developed by (Baskara et al., 2024), which posits that trust functions as an amplifier of the effects of service on public perceptions. When citizens believe that an institution has ability, benevolence, and integrity, improvements in service quality are directly interpreted as concrete evidence of the institution's commitment to public interests.

The findings of (Janssen et al., 2018) further emphasize that high public trust in digital government services enhances service effectiveness and government reputation in the eyes of citizens. These results demonstrate that in modern public service ecosystems, trust serves as a key linking variable that strengthens the values of professionalism, reliability, and institutional legitimacy.

Overall, this study indicates that public trust is not merely an outcome of good services but also a catalyst that amplifies the impact of service quality on institutional image. For KPKNL Pekanbaru, this means that strategies to improve service quality must go hand in hand with programs aimed at strengthening public trust through transparency, open information, and accountability in state asset management and auction processes. By maintaining institutional integrity and consistently building public trust, improvements in service quality will have a stronger leverage in reinforcing KPKNL Pekanbaru's positive image as a professional, credible, and highly principled public institution.

3.2.4. Moderating Role of Public Trust in the Relationship Between e-WOM and Institutional Image

The study finds that public trust does not moderate the relationship between e-WOM and institutional image, with a path coefficient of 0.072, a t-statistic of $0.892 < 1.973$, and a p-value of $0.372 > 0.05$. This means that public trust does not strengthen or weaken the effect of e-WOM on institutional image. In other words, although e-WOM has been proven to positively influence institutional image, this effect does not depend on the level of public trust in the institution. This suggests that, in the context of KPKNL Pekanbaru, the power of e-WOM in shaping image is more influenced by message quality and content credibility in digital media than by the level of institutional trust held by the public.

Although this result differs from the initial expectation of the study, it can be explained theoretically. According to (Mendoza-Moreira et al., 2025), the effectiveness of e-WOM primarily depends on the credibility of the message source, the intensity of its dissemination, and the valence of the information received by the audience. In the digital realm, trust in the institution is not the main factor that determines how the public responds to messages, as users tend to be more influenced by peer opinions, direct experiences, and concrete evidence shared online. Therefore, public trust functions more as a factor shaping perceptions of service rather than as a strengthening factor in the relationship between e-WOM and institutional image.

This finding is consistent with (Dwivedi et al., 2021b) who found that the influence of social media on organizational image is stronger when driven by direct interaction and authentic content, rather than institutional trust alone. Similarly, (Beyari & Garamoun, 2024) explain that e-WOM is effective in improving brand image when the circulating messages are positive, informative, and relevant to user experiences. In the public sector context, (Guo et al., 2025) stress that social media functions as a two-way communication medium capable of shaping public perceptions, but its impact remains dependent on the quality of the narrative rather than solely on the level of trust in government institutions.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature by revealing that e-WOM and public trust function through different mechanisms in shaping institutional image. While public trust primarily reinforces perceptions derived from direct service experiences, the influence of e-WOM in digital environments is largely determined by social interaction patterns and online information dynamics. Institutional image, therefore, is increasingly constructed through social proof, reflected in the intensity and positivity of digital discourse rather than solely by institutional trust.

From a practical perspective, these findings highlight the importance of strategic digital communication management in public sector organizations. Strengthening institutional image requires proactive narrative management, credible information dissemination, and responsive engagement with stakeholders in digital spaces. By fostering authentic and participatory e-WOM communication, public institutions can enhance and sustain their institutional image in the digital era, even when public trust does not function as a significant moderating factor.

3. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that public service quality and e-WOM significantly influence institutional image in the public sector, while public trust strengthens the effect of service quality but does not moderate the influence of e-WOM. These findings highlight the differentiated mechanisms through which service performance and digital communication shape institutional reputation. Although this study provides theoretical and practical contributions, it is limited to a single institutional context and cross-sectional data. Future studies should incorporate broader samples, longitudinal approaches, and additional contextual variables to improve generalizability and deepen understanding of institutional image formation.

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